

## Politics and the Soldier: On the Limits of Nation-building as a Political and Military Objective

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### Abstract

Political decisions and military doctrine require that soldiers be warriors who manage violence and nation-builders who cultivate polities. Drawing upon a textual analysis of President Obama's inaugural address and the work of Eric Voegelin and Hannah Arendt, I demonstrate that a polity comprises both tangible and intangible elements, both of which are necessary for a functioning polity. The tangible element of politics includes such things as the provision of security, essential services, and bureaucratic administration. The intangible element of politics comprises *meaning*. I argue that the soldier as warrior can provide security. The soldier as nation-builder can cultivate essential services and governance. The soldier can help create the space in which politics can occur. However, the soldier as nation-builder can do very little toward building "meaning," which is an essential component of a durable polity.

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*“They are wrong who think that politics is like an ocean voyage or a military campaign, something to be done with some end in view, something which levels off as soon as that end is reached. It is not a public chore to be got over with; it is a way of life.” Plutarch*

The notion of nation-building, taken in its literal sense, contains at least two errors. First, a nation (or a polity) requires for its continued existence intangible substance that one cannot possibly “build”; this requisite substance simply *arises* (or not) among a people. Second, one cannot “build” a nation as one builds, say, a table. The building of a table is accomplished by extracting raw, non-sentient material from the earth. A craftsman then shapes the raw material into a defined, completed item. In politics, there is no craftsman. The relevant material is neither raw nor non-sentient, and no political action results in a defined, completed item. This paper defends the foregoing assertions by presenting an understanding of political reality that encompasses both a tangible and an intangible dimension. Careful consideration of political reality’s intangible dimension should be of interest to U.S. civilian policymakers and military professionals whose discourse now includes routine references to nation-building, stability operations, and the threats emanating from failed and failing states.

Political reality encompasses much more than the branches of government, bureaucracies, interest groups, and voting. A key component of political reality, particularly as it relates to the specification of strategic ends and military campaign planning, is simply not perceptible with the five senses. This component is invisible and intangible—yet it is strategically decisive. Builders of nations can neither “build” nor generate this intangible component with certainty. Expeditionary nation builders must rely ultimately on political activity that is outside of their control. Political leaders, who define strategic ends and direct the military services, and military professionals, who “manage violence” and “build nations,” should consider the plausibility and strategic implications of this argument. Moreover, citizens should reflect upon the new roles that their soldiers have been ordered to fill.

The conduct of military operations among and with an indigenous populace requires political judgment. We were once accustomed to think of soldiering as the attempt to impose with violence one’s will over *the other*. Today it is a common if not uncontroversial claim among American policymakers

and military professionals that soldiering includes also cooperative encounters whereby one may not (and perhaps cannot) simply impose one's will over *the other*. When the principal way of attaining one's ends ceases to be violent imposition and begins with a consideration of *the other's* words and deeds, the soldier is on his way toward participation in political action. It follows that military professionals must be able to (a) develop a reasonable and coherent account of political reality, (b) identify a justifiable table of instrumental and normative principles to guide action, and (c) discern how best to bring principled action to bear on political reality. Political reality here means nothing more than the phenomena that attends the geographical, historical, and cultural plurality of human persons in community.

Political understanding, although requisite, is slippery and fleeting. As an empirical fact, no single understanding of political reality prevails. This brute fact no doubt arises as a result of another empirical fact, which is the fact of pluralism; i.e., there exists a variety of thick and thin understandings of the human person, the community, the world, and the fundamental mysteries of human existence. Emperors, kings, tyrants, dictators, statesman, and legislators have always needed political understanding. The United States' campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan reveal that American military professionals increasingly have need of it as well. Interpretations of this elusive political reality inform U.S. military doctrine, theater campaign plans, and company-level operations. Today's military doctrine instructs military practitioners about socio-political "drivers of conflict" and frets over the security threats emanating from failed and failing states. Military campaign plans include objectives that aim specifically toward improving a "host" nation's governance, economics, infrastructure, and essential services. At the sandy-boots level of execution, sergeants and lieutenants have become de facto town councilmen, economic planners, and political agenda setters. It follows that a newly commissioned officer is soon ensconced in politics, and political concerns will follow her as she progresses throughout her company- and field-grade service. This state of affairs is what operations "among the people" and a certain ethical imperative to respect the dignity and culture of *the other* have wrought.<sup>1</sup>

The military profession, having taken its cue from post-9/11 politico-strategic documents, has cultivated an interest in the very same political problems that have puzzled rulers, philosophers, and political theorists for millennia. The political theorist Jeffrey Isaac, for instance, observes that Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*

is continuous with a long and venerable political science tradition. From Machiavelli's *The Prince* to Antonio Gramsci's "The Modern Prince," from Lenin's *The State and Revolution* to Samuel P. Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies*, writers seeking a "science of politics" have argued not simply about how to understand the dynamics of rebellion and the mechanisms of state power but also about the desirability of different ways of mobilizing and channeling rebellion and of incorporating it within stable political structures.<sup>2</sup>

The topics that fill the Big Books of political theory are now the concern of military professionals: ethics and the nature of the human person (e.g., the Abu Ghraib scandal and the requirement to protect noncombatants); the variety of interpretive narratives that reveal how peoples understand themselves (e.g., the West, Christianity, Islam, and culture); the transition from one type of political regime to the next (e.g., the tribe, the Caliphate, the empire, authoritarianism, the nation-state, and democracy); the persistence of entrenched political cleavages (e.g., the *haves* and *have-nots*, Shi'a and Sunni, and the West and the rest); the variety of constitutions, laws, and the limits of political leadership (e.g., Sharia law and the possibility of "Jeffersonian democracy"); and the rise of a common understanding of justice among a populace (e.g., constitution writing and the possibility of reintegrating former insurgents into a society).<sup>3</sup>

These concerns preoccupy not only the United States' top-level military leaders, but the rank-and-file soldiers as well. The last Bush administration's strategic admixture of security, stability, human rights, and democracy has elicited a military response that includes, among other things, a new dictum that "Soldiers and Marines are expected to be nation builders as well as warriors."<sup>4</sup> Besides offensive and defensive operations, soldiers perform stability operations, which "are conducted to help establish order that advances U.S. interests and values. The immediate goal often is to provide the local populace with security, restore essential services, and meet humanitarian needs. The long-term goal is to help develop indigenous capacity for securing essential services, a viable market economy, rule of law, democratic

institutions, and a robust civil society.”<sup>5</sup> The Department of Defense has, since 2005, declared that “Stability operations are a core U.S. military mission that the Department of Defense shall be prepared to conduct with proficiency equivalent to combat operations.”<sup>6</sup> The result is that generals and privates work together—albeit at different levels—to promote reconciliation between warring groups, mitigate conflict between tribes and sects, nourish effective governance, reduce the suffering of the ubiquitous poor and neglected, cultivate law and order, and help create unified, durable polities capable of moving through history on their own.

The intermingling of war and politics, which now permeates the entire military rank-and-file, demands the studious attention of military professionals and the politicians who send them into battle. I argue that politics has a tangible dimension (with which most attentive military professionals are, by now, familiar) and an intangible dimension (with which fewer are familiar). This intangible dimension, which comprises meaning-laden symbols and stories, is an essential component of politics. It follows that—however much a nation-builder must be aware of the presence or absence of these unifying symbols and stories—the nation-builder cannot simply build a polity’s intangible structures of meaning in the same way that one builds a police station or a highway network. The manner by which a people becomes a polity has less to do with systems and infrastructure and more to do with the empirical mystery integral to political foundations. One can solve a puzzle; however, one does not solve—and much less does one build—those statistically uncooperative moments of political foundation. Such answers, such solutions, *simply arise*—unpredictably, unintentionally, and always in cooperation (or in conspiracy) with others. Oftentimes such solutions fail to arise at all, even at the expense of vast numbers of lives. Such is the simultaneous indispensability and elusiveness of the intangible dimension of politics.

### **Section One: The intangible dimension of politics**

President Barack Obama’s inaugural address provides a straightforward and familiar example with which to illustrate the distinction between the tangible and intangible dimensions of politics. The tangible refers to nuts-and-bolts politics; e.g., voting, bureaucratic administration, institutional battles, and public

policymaking. The intangible refers to symbols and narratives that engender a level of unity among human persons and disclose *meaning*. Discerning examples of tangible politics is no more difficult than reading a newspaper's headlines. Discerning intangible symbols and narratives is a bit harder. If we follow the example of Plato's Socrates, political enquiry begins properly not with theoretical abstraction, but by listening to the words that real persons speak. Hence, I begin by looking closely at the words of one political leader, thereby presuming that political oratory is a good place to find the narratives and symbols that arise within any given polity (other good sources include the coffee shop, the classroom, the dinner table, religious sermons, political demonstrations, etc.). These symbols and narratives—whose lineage is oftentimes ancient, spiritual, and historical—provide a handle by which to grasp at the invisible stuff that holds a people together; i.e., its societal glue or, in the words of the philosopher Eric Voegelin, its “community substance.”<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, Obama's speech includes the workaday concerns of politicians and their constituencies. All of the standard elements of the American *Zeitgeist* are present: terrorism, unemployment, business, and health care. The tangible aspects of politics, from infrastructure to technology and from energy to schools, receive prominent and sustained emphasis in his speech.

We will build the roads and bridges, the electric grids and digital lines that feed our commerce and bind us together. We will restore science to its rightful place and wield technology's wonders to raise health care's quality...and lower its cost. We will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories. And we will transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age.<sup>8</sup>

If the speech is full of programmatic, tangible substance, it contains also the intangible stuff of politics; i.e., the linguistic symbols and narratives that compose what military doctrine knows as culture. Political discourse is, among other things, largely a reflection of a polity's matrix of cultural influences. The U.S. Army's Field Manual 3-24: *Counterinsurgency* acknowledges the importance of the linguistic elements of culture. The field manual observes that culture is a “‘web of meaning’ shared by members of a particular society or group within a society.”<sup>9</sup> This web of meaning, which comes in the form of “rituals, symbols, ceremonies, myths, and narratives,”<sup>10</sup> is of decisive importance insofar as it “influences how

people make judgments about what is right and wrong, assess what is important and unimportant, categorize things, and deal with things that do not fit into existing categories.”<sup>11</sup> U.S. military doctrine states also that, “Commanders should pay careful attention to the meaning of common symbols in the AO [area of operations] and show how various groups use them.”<sup>12</sup>

If we apply the field manual’s appreciation of symbols to the president’s specimen of American oratory, we find that the symbolic references Obama employs are not unique to his address. In fact, his speech draws upon a substance that is remarkably consistent, even if not static, throughout the decades.<sup>13</sup> In terms of narratives, Obama evokes: (a) a people “faithful to the ideals of our forbears, and true to our founding documents,” (b) “our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation,” (c) a nation of “risk takers, the doers, the makers of things,” who “packed up their few worldly possessions...in search of a new life,” and (d) of persons who “toiled in sweatshops,” “settled the West,” “endured the lash of the whip,” and “fought and died in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sanh.” Most comprehensively, Obama speaks of a “journey we continue to today.”

Besides interpreting American history as a continuing “journey,” Obama employs several familiar symbols of the American narrative. He refers to “We the People,” “the common good,” “the rule of law,” and “the rights of man.” He includes references to the “ideals” of “dignity,” “justness,” “humility,” “restraint,” “mutual interest,” and “mutual respect.” He reminds Americans of a “noble idea”: i.e., “the God-given promise that all are *equal*, all are *free*, and all deserve to pursue their full measure of *happiness*” [emphasis is mine]. And he adduces durable virtues, some of which have a theological origin (faith and hope) and some of which are the hardy, secondary values of workaday life (honesty, hard work, courage, fair play, tolerance, curiosity, loyalty).<sup>14</sup>

It is clear that for Obama, as well as for those politicians and citizens who find his enduring symbols appealing, politics is about more than simply the mechanical, the institutional, or the material. Politics is also about meaning. In many narratives, to include Obama’s, we come across a sort of transcendent

meaning expressed as something toward which citizens should aspire or emulate. For instance, Obama declares specifically that all Americans should emulate the nation's soldiers, who, in a "spirit of service," have repeatedly summoned a "willingness to find meaning in something greater than themselves."

Two sorts of substance compose Obama's narrative. First, there is the stuff of nuts-and-bolts policy, wherein politics is understood in terms of the political scientist Harold Lasswell's famous question of "Who gets what, when, and how?" In Lasswell's formulation, politics is about power, its distribution, and its decisive role in determining the allocation of scarce resources. Politics is about legislatures, executives, judiciaries, bureaucracies, parties, interest groups, the media, voting, and demonstrations. Politics understood in this sense often emphasizes a reduced anthropology; i.e., the political scientist emphasizes one dimension of the human person while bracketing the others. Hence, the human person appears in scientific studies as nameless and faceless "rational actors" or "utility maximizers" with "preferences." Although this partial view of the human person is useful and necessary for the scientific study of political behavior, what risks being lost in the study of politics is the human person in all his or her complexity. A materialistic science of politics understandably but dangerously neglects the human person's interior or spiritual dimension, which is precisely where the questions of purpose and meaning arise. Meaning, communicated in symbols and narratives, composes politics' second substance.

Political science tends to view the human person as a rational actor or a utility maximizer with preferences. This understanding seems to underlie the U.S. military's strategic assumption whereby the provision of essential services (water, food, electricity, etc.) will (a) increase popular support for the government and (b) thereby eliminate the incentive to strap on explosives as a terrorist or improvise an explosive device as an insurgent. Of course, the assumption of utility maximization is quite useful in generating scientific findings or crafting new research questions, but such a focus ought not to eclipse the criticality of the intangible dimension of politics and its relation to human interiority. It is perhaps this intangible dimension that brings us closer to an understanding of, say, the full amplitude of political reality inherent in a blood-soaked, flesh-strewn street after a suicide attack.



The political philosopher Harvey Mansfield's riposte to Lasswell, for whom the distribution of power and material goods matters most, is that "Politics is about what makes you angry, no so much about what you want. Your wants do matter but mainly because you feel you are entitled to have them satisfied and get angry when they are not."<sup>15</sup> His application of this insight to American politics is illustrative: "In our democracy, politics is motivated especially by the sense that you are not being treated equally." The topic shifts from the human being as a utility maximizer to the human person who believes his existence and his goals are entitled to some amount of respect irrespective of one's gender, heritage, social status, or investment portfolio. The centuries-old linguistic symbol of equality, which Obama invokes, has something to do with this belief. More importantly, one's conception of equality and desire for respect are real, but they are not tangible. Equality, respect, and the desire to realize them are undeniable political realities that determine much of what happens in politics. These political realities relate to the human person's interior—and hence intangible—dimension.

The distinction between the intangible and tangible dimension of politics has substantial theoretical merit. The political philosopher Eric Voegelin, among others, distinguishes between politics' externality and its intangibility:

Human society is not merely a fact, like a natural phenomenon. Though it has externality as one of its important components, it is as a whole a little world, a *cosmion*, illuminated with meaning from within by the human beings who continuously create and bear it as the mode and condition of their self-realization. ..The self-illumination of society through symbols is an integral part of social reality, and one may even say its essential part, for through such symbolization the members of a society experience it as more than an accident or convenience; they experience it as of their human essence.<sup>16</sup>

Human persons in community, explains Voegelin, interpret or illuminate their collective existence by imparting meaning to their existence and actions. Moreover, this meaning, asserts the philosopher, is not just a part of political existence, but "its essential part." If Voegelin is correct, one must consider the possibility that the "fluffy" or symbolic parts of Obama's address are not merely ornamental or rhetorical (although, perhaps, they are partly that), but essential components of American politics. Obama's symbols and the mode of their reception serve as indicators of both societal unity via a widely shared self-

interpretation. The linguistic symbols (e.g., liberty and dignity) and narratives (our “journey”) in some sense commensurate in importance to the material (e.g., infrastructure and commerce). President Obama is, in Voegelin’s words, merely “illuminating” what it means to be an American by re-creating a variation of a well-known American narrative.

Much of Obama’s address resonates with the vast majority of Americans regardless of their particular identities or political affiliations. If we compare the symbols and narratives in Obama’s address with those of George W. Bush’s first inaugural address, we will find a great many similarities (i.e., where Obama speaks of a “journey,” Bush II speaks of the “*story* of a fallen and fallible people”). This intangible substance provides the invisible latticework on which to conduct the daily business of politics. Without this cluster of shared symbols and narratives of self-understanding, we would simply have a collection of anonymous and rationally acting human beings on a part of the North American continent following rules, competing for the distribution of goods, and pursuing a measure of security and welfare. Such an approach discounts *American* history and its triumphs, tragedies, and injustices. It discounts *American* patriotism and its capacity to responsibly unite the political right, left, and center for the sake of some noble enterprise. It discounts specifically *American* ideals, toward which Americans aspire and measure progress or regress. And it discounts *American* civil society, which provides the contexts for countless smaller communities and their narratives, voluntary associations, places of worship, and families.

The argument I am developing is that such an anonymous collection of human beings simply does not exist in community. Any community of persons—if it is to move durably through history—must have an intangible matrix of substance that holds it together and that distinguishes its group from others. This “community substance” is not a nicety, but an absolute requisite for a viable politics. Of course, the plausibility of my claim depends on whether Voegelin and a great many other political theorists and social scientists who study unifying symbols and narratives are onto something. Although political

representatives (i.e., leaders) do indeed attend to the allocation of scarce and tangible goods and services, political theory suggests that effective political representation consists of much more.

In this paper, I employ Voegelin's and, especially, Arendt's theories of how political meaning arises; however, their concerns (if not their approaches) are not idiosyncratic. Two theorists, with quite different interests and methodological habits, exemplify the importance of the sources of political unity and meaning. Rogers M. Smith's inquiry into unifying meanings is one contribution to a larger research agenda: "There can hardly be any topic more richly significant for explanatory political inquiries than questions of how people come to have the senses of political affiliation and allegiance that they possess and how those senses of belonging change. There can hardly be any topic more important to normative political debates than the question of the forms of political membership and identity we ought to embrace as our own."<sup>17</sup> This interest has led Smith to posit "the category of 'ethically constitutive' stories" as part of a "theory of people-making."<sup>18</sup> A second example is Jürgen Habermas, whose concern is to identify the proper mix of solidarity's sources in a liberal democracy. He thereby posits a "patriotism linked to the constitution," which "means that the citizens wholeheartedly accept the principles of the constitution, not only in their abstract substance, but very specifically out of the historical context of the history of each nation."<sup>19</sup>

If Voegelin's symbols, Arendt's Action, Smith's narratives, and Habermas's solidarity suggest the importance of the intangible dimension of politics, it follows that so-called builders of nations must "track" or monitor the progress toward not only the realization of viable institutions, legal and regulatory codes, and infrastructural systems, but the ascendance of meaning as well. Builders of nations must somehow equip a society's political representatives to articulate both policy prescriptions (in accordance with Lasswell's politics) and an aspirational meaning and self-understanding (in accordance with Voegelin's politics). The relationship between political representatives and a polity's meaning is crucial.

Voegelin distinguishes between two types of representation necessary for durable governance. First, there is elemental (or constitutional) representation, whereby rulers establish effective governance

through functioning institutions. This domain encompasses such things as security, essential services, and public infrastructure. Second, there is existential representation, which comprises a symbiosis between a political leader and a widely recognized source of legitimate authority. This source, which draws on a people's intangible matrix of symbols and narratives, in turn serves as the origin of positive law. The necessary component of existential representation is an animating, intangible *idea* that is noticeable insofar as, once established, it becomes superior to the rulers and the basis of the rulers' authority: If the United States' animating idea comprises symbols and narratives inherent in, say, the nation's founding documents and history, a political leader such as President Obama both embraces and becomes an official representative of the nation's animating idea: "To be a representative means to guide, in a ruling position, the work of realizing the idea through institutional embodiment; and the power of a ruler has authority insofar as he is able to make his factual power representative of the idea."<sup>20</sup>

On the one hand, the occupants and the institutions of our branches of government constitute our elemental or constitutional representation. On the other hand, the complex of symbols, narratives, and founding documents (e.g., the ethos of Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and *The Federalist*) contain the idea that was both established by America's founders, unpacked and modified throughout American history, and now serves as the rubric under which our current crop of political leaders proceed to govern. To the degree a ruler's governance jibes with the complex of ruling ideas, existential representation obtains.<sup>21</sup>

The recent U.S. presidential election is a good example of elemental and existential representation at work. We notice elemental representation at play in the mechanics of elections, constitutional provisions, and the peaceful exchange of power. We notice existential representation at play when, in the course of listening to Obama's inaugural speech, the symbols and narratives he invokes—complete with an interpretive history and a set of normative aspirations—ring true. It is both enormously significant *and* taken for granted that President Obama did not talk of a dictatorship of the proletariat, or a master race's thousand-year rule, or a Christian theocracy, or the re-establishment of the Caliphate, or a post-

metaphysical laicism. Obama and his predecessors have each adopted or “covered down on” the same ruling ideas that have developed over centuries. The new president’s invocation of symbols was typically American. Indeed, his *re*-presentation of America’s *ruling idea* or *truth* very much establishes Obama as this truth’s advocate, protector, and—most importantly—servant.

I have presented the distinction between elemental and existential representation in order to consider the plausibility of Voegelin’s conclusion, which is that “In order to be representative, it is not enough for a government to be representative in the constitutional sense (our elemental type of representative institutions); it must also be representative in the existential sense of realizing the idea of the institution.” It follows that “If a government is nothing but representative in the constitutional sense, a representative ruler in the existential sense will sooner or later make an end of it; and quite possibly the new existential ruler will not be too representative in the constitutional sense.”<sup>22</sup> Voegelin’s conclusion, if correct, ought to raise some interest among U.S. national and military strategists. Without an animating idea that resonates among a populace, a regime’s political leaders cannot survive.

The crucial question for policymakers and (more recently) members of the military profession follows: If it is true that (a) there is such a thing as an intangible dimension of politics, (b) that the intangible dimension of politics and existential representation outweigh or are at least equal in importance to the tangible dimension and elemental representation, and (c) that existential representation is an essential component of durable of governance, then *what really ought to be the definition of success in the United States’ nation-building efforts, particularly when the profession of arms assumes a prominent role?* If nation-building requires the “construction” of the tangible capacities for essential services, infrastructure, and the like, does not nation-building also require the “construction” of the intangible elements of meaning?

Put otherwise, let us suppose that (a) each American soldier speaks the appropriate host-nation languages with fluency, (b) that soldiers avoid committing extraordinary breaches of etiquette and ethics, (c) that soldiers of all ranks apply counterinsurgency and stability-operations doctrine with artful flair and

prudent selection, (d) that the military's campaign plans and the nation's strategic documents are as expertly and rightly crafted as possible, and (e) that America's military services and governmental agencies cooperate fully and robustly with international institutions, non-governmental organizations, and other nations' governments. Given these suppositions, *what chances of strategic failure remain?* Might this failure be related to meaning or its absence? Might it be true that the problem of nation building is principally a problem of generating meaning and not first and foremost of infrastructure or essential services? What if it is meaning, as an essential political component, that renders the functions of elemental representation (i.e., security, justice, social well-being, governance, and economic stabilization)<sup>23</sup> possible and durable? How then does an expeditionary nation-builder confer on a foreign land's people the latticework of symbols that is the indigenous population's counterpart to the narratives and symbols that Obama invokes?

## **Section Two: Who, really, builds nations?**

Nation building, according to a representative primer on the subject, "involves the use of armed force as part of a broader effort to promote political and economic reforms with the objective of *transforming a society* emerging from conflict into one at peace with itself and its neighbors."<sup>24</sup> The doctrinal rubric under which the military pursues nation-building is stability operations. U.S. Army Field Manual 3-07, *Stability Operations* communicates a nuanced understanding of victory whose achievement "will assume new dimensions as we strengthen our ability to generate 'soft' power to promote participation in government, spur economic development, and address the root causes of conflict among the disenfranchised populations of the world. At the heart of this approach is a comprehensive approach to stability operations that integrates the tools of statecraft with our military forces, international partners, humanitarian organizations, and the private sector."<sup>25</sup> It appears that politicians, public-policy scholars, and soldiers are now face-to-face with the timeless problems of politics, which include the transformation of societies, the identification of so-called root causes of conflict, and the development of durable polities and economies. It appears also that, if the aforementioned primer and Field Manual 3-07 are

representative of the nation-building literature, the tangible dimension of politics receives thorough attention while the appreciation paid to the intangible dimension is almost non-existent.

Of course, intellectual confrontation with the timeless problem of constructing durable polities has a venerable pedigree, which includes such luminaries as Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Publius, and Tocqueville. Although none of their dialogues or treatises possesses the single, universally applicable recipe for organizing and maintaining a body politic, each of these Big Thinkers has expertly struggled to understand those complex political variables that—to the nation-builder’s knowledge or not—remain operative even during twenty-first century efforts. Most importantly, these thinkers’ explorations are valuable not mainly for their strictly institutional or policy prescriptions, but for their catalogue and arrangement of the relevant intangible variables as well as the wisdom that careful reflection on these intangibles imparts.

The ancient and modern Big Thinkers of politics found the knottiest problems not in the development of positive constitutions, or governmental institutions, or the distribution of goods. To be sure, crafting constitutions and institutions is not easy. Yet the greatest political thinkers’ main preoccupation was to change—oftentimes amidst grave socio-political turbulence—ingrained ways of thinking about such matters as political authority, citizenship, moral codes, and religion. In each case, they were attempting to effect, to use Nietzsche’s expression, a “transvaluation of values” and a new way of perceiving the world. Of course, institutional politics did matter to these Big Thinkers, but changes in institutions have as a prerequisite changes within human persons’ interiorly situated hearts and minds.

We study the greatest political thinkers not so much to gain institutional insight, but to learn of and appreciate their conceptions of persons in community. Such study leads to questions. For instance, why does the concept of the soul, justice, and *the good* figure prominently in the political work of Plato and Aristotle? And if Machiavelli writes in one place that “a prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else at his art but that of war and its orders and discipline,”<sup>26</sup> why does he suggest elsewhere that the introduction of intangible “new modes and orders” is of even greater

importance than war (Cf. *The Prince*, Ch. 6 and *The Discourses on Livy*, Preface)? Why does Hobbes, who prefigures elements of the West's secularly liberal politics, find it necessary to elaborate his own theology in *The Leviathan* to complement his version of the contract-theory of government that Americans know so well? As a final example, why does Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* investigate the intangible determinants of America's unique blend of intellectual, moral, and social habits (what Tocqueville calls "the habits of the heart") in the course of assessing the attributes and prospects of American democracy? Indeed, conceptions of the soul, hierarchies of values, religious beliefs and theology, and a people's *habits of the heart* figure prominently in evaluating the strengths and weakness of, say, America's democratic experiment specifically and the prerequisites for stable, hygienic governance more generally.

The decisive problems of governance and politics, if we take our cue from the Big Thinkers, is the development among a regime and its people of a putatively right, true, or good understanding of the human person, of community, of the world, and—oftentimes—of some understanding of a moral or divine order. Yet, as an empirical fact, the producers of such thick interpretations of reality come at interstitial and unpredictable moments in history. Such innovators introduce to humanity new concepts and symbols first into one specific geographic and societal context. Later (and indirectly) these concepts and symbols may come to have a more extensive influence through socialization. Tracing a specific symbol's chronological and spatial lineage is never easy, but in broad sweeps the influence of the Big Thinkers' innovations is empirically undeniable as evidenced by the developers and influence of each of the world religions (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism), the philosophers who ushered in novel ways of perceiving the world (e.g., Socrates, Augustine, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Locke, Nietzsche), and the innumerable gadflies that question prevalent social and political conventions (e.g., Luther, Galileo, the American Abolitionists, Mark Twain, the American Suffragettes, the Civil Rights marchers, the Polish Solidarity movement). The empirical reality of these phenomena leads us to the topic of meaning's *creation* in politics.



Thus far I have asserted that (a) politics comprises tangible and intangible elements, (b) that the intangible elements are an essential component of a durable polity, (c) that these intangible elements relate principally to meaning, which in turn constrains and guides the ruler, and (d) that meaning, which comprises linguistic symbols and narratives, are a function of religious, philosophic, and activist conceptions of the world. I have shown that the political questions strategists ask (or ought to be asking) today are the same as those that the Big Thinkers throughout the ages have asked. I have also indicated that some of these Big Thinkers' many and varied conceptions of political reality have come to shape—whether knowingly or not—the self-understandings of persons and communities over the course of centuries.

Let's now suppose that a polity, if it is to move durably through history, requires some form of unity. Moreover, let's suppose that the substance of this unity is a *meaning* comprising a cluster of more or less compatible symbols and narratives. It follows that nation “builders” are in much the same position that Plato's Socrates found himself when desiring to build a “city in speech” in the *Republic*. Early on, Socrates discovers that his hypothetical city needs unity and that the way to achieve such unity—as the city's sole builder—is to instill in the peoples' minds a unifying narrative known as the Noble Lie or the Noble Myth. Political theorists have responded in various ways to Plato's tactic. Among the more careful critics of Plato (and thereby of the Western tradition of political thought) is the political theorist Hannah Arendt. Her argument with Western political thought is its invariable tendency to view political activity instrumentally; i.e., in terms of means and ends. That is, we believe that we can fabricate “ends” in politics in the same way that a carpenter fabricates a chair in his workshop. To wit: Just as Plato spoke of building a city in speech in ancient Athens, so to do policymakers and military strategists speak of nation-*building* over two millennia later.

Understanding Arendt's theory requires careful attention to her glossary. Patricia Owens, a scholar who has applied Arendt's thought to international relations, warns that “in order to retrieve a deeper understanding of politics and war from Arendt's political theory, we must be attentive to her unique

lexicon. This is all the more important given the lack of agreement in wider social and political thought concerning the meaning of key terms under consideration.”<sup>27</sup> Useful to this essay is Arendt’s distinction between Work on the one hand and Action linked to Speech on the other. In Work, human persons fabricate those durable things that compose the material regularity of our existence: tools, vehicles, infrastructure, buildings, etc. Such artifacts “give the world the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature that is man.”<sup>28</sup> It is because of Work that we encounter with soothing familiarity the same breakfast table, the same work desk, the same decorations and equipment, and the same house and public infrastructure on a day-to-day basis. Work, or the production of durable artifacts, entails two sorts of violence in the sense that the human person must, first, extract raw materials from the earth and, second, shape and assemble the raw materials into a human artifact.

If the end product of Work is an artifact, Speech and Action have no such definite, tangible, intended end. To act, explains Arendt, “in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin...to set something into motion.”<sup>29</sup> Action, understood in this sense, is never a solitary endeavor; i.e., it is always done in the presence of others: “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.”<sup>30</sup> Whereas the product of Work is an artifact, “the ‘products’ of action and speech...together constitute the fabric of human relationships and affairs...Their reality depends entirely upon human plurality, upon the constant presence of others who can see and hear and therefore testify to their existence.” She continues: “In order to become worldly things, that is, deeds and facts and events and patterns of thoughts or ideas, they must first be seen, heard, and remembered and then transformed, reified as it were, into things—into sayings of poetry, the written page or the printed book, into paintings or sculpture, into all sorts of records, documents, and monuments.”<sup>31</sup>

The intangible symbols that compose Obama’s address are, in Arendt’s terms, remembrances of the specifically American “fabric of human relationships and affairs.” The symbols that emanate from these

relationships and affairs arise specifically from words and deeds; i.e., a community's "fabric" arises in the first instance from Action, "in which a We is always engaged in changing our common world."<sup>32</sup> It is the development of this fabric via Action that a community, a *We*, arises:

Human plurality, the faceless "They" from which the individual Self splits to be itself alone, is divided into a great many units, and it is only as a member of such a unit, that is, of a community, that men are ready for action. The manifoldness of these communities is evinced in a great many different forms and shapes, each obeying different laws, having different habits and customs, and cherishing different memories of its past, i.e., a manifoldness of traditions.<sup>33</sup>

Arendt describes the fabric of human relationships, which is a prerequisite for a community that is to move durably through history, also in terms of a web from which "stories" (such as Obama's "journey" or Bush II's "story of a fallen and fallible people") emanate:

The realm of human affairs, strictly speaking, consists of the web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together. The disclosure of the 'who' through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact.<sup>34</sup>

Work produces artifacts. Speech and Action produce stories. To Work is to gather and assemble the means (the resources) in order to accomplish some end (the artifact). To proffer Speech and conduct Action is to disclose oneself and thereby affect other persons' thoughts and deeds. Work achieves a definitive, tangible end. Speech and Action begin something new whose near- and long-term results are mostly unintended and unpredictable. The activities attendant to Work are instrumental (i.e., they accord with a means-end logic)—whereby we assemble something in order to accomplish a definitive end state. The activities attendant to Speech and Action are performative—whereby we as a community begin something new. We initiate a political beginning not so much "in order to" achieve some end state (erecting a barn) but more so "for the sake" of some principle (e.g., "to form a more perfect union" or "establish justice").<sup>35</sup>

The product of Work is an artifact; the eventual outcome of Speech and Act is a story with *meaning*.<sup>36</sup> The product of a successful Work is more or less predictable, intended, and fixed. The outcome of

Speech and Action is wholly unpredictable, unintended, and open-ended. One may be the single fabricator of an artifact. Only a multiplicity of diverse persons can engage in that authentic Speech and Action whose remembrance ends up as a story with meaning. The generation of meaning-laden symbols, stories, and narratives is a communal affair with no foreseeable end—at least according to Arendt's description of human affairs and (thereby) politics.

It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose; but it is also because of this medium, in which action alone is real, that it “produces” stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things...Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through speech and action, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.<sup>37</sup>

It follows that “Whoever begins to act must know that he has started something whose end he can never foretell, if only because his own deed has already changed everything and made it even more unpredictable.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Whither the soldier as expeditionary nation-builder?**

What significance do Voegelin's and Arendt's insights into the structures of political reality have for the military professional? To the degree that a soldier is a warrior, he must at some point come to grips with the fact that—as a manager of violence—violence and war have a logic wherein destruction, killing, and domination make sense and have value. The soldier realizes that—as a warrior—he is an instrumental actor, much like Arendt's fabricator, whose intent is to shape through physical violence a human reality such that it conforms with the military unit's mission and the commander's intent. Just as the carpenter does violence to a tree to obtain wood and produce a chair, so does the warrior do violence to earth and enemy flesh and bone to realize the commander's aim. The warrior, much like the carpenter, is a fabricator, and the deeds of each have a practical end. The perspective of *the other* matters not to the carpenter, for the wood he reshapes is inanimate. Moreover, the perspective of *the other* matters to the warrior only insofar as seeing through the enemy's eyes conduces to extinguishing the enemy's freedom

and frustrating the enemy's tactical or strategic intent. To be sure, ethics and politics put restraints on the logic of war such that war is fettered; but an understanding of war is impossible without understanding its pure logic.<sup>39</sup>

Politics has an altogether different logic if Arendt is correct. To be sure, she indicts the Western approach to politics, from Plato onwards, for conceiving of politics as an instrumental endeavor or a craft with an end state. If Plato commits this error by constructing his "city in speech" in *The Republic*, she would likely also indict a large portion of the scholarship on nation-building. Although we can expect instrumental reason, violence, and oppression to mitigate or frustrate the ample flowering of the political moment, the logic of politics remains always a force at play. It is for this reason that even a tyrant must account for the force of politics. This force, which is always present in greater or lesser amounts, is the capacity of human persons, through speech and action, to create meaning that can change the world through the instantiation of what Machiavelli calls "new modes and orders." Just as the soldier as warrior must contemplate the logic of war, so too must the soldier as nation-builder contemplate the logic of politics. The alternative is that the soldier is insufficiently aware of his or her environment.

The conduct of war is an instrumental business. The conduct of politics is partly instrumental, but it is also—and significantly—partly a meaning-generating adventure. The conduct of war demands the imposition of one's will over *the other*. The conduct of politics requires cultivating the space for deliberation and discourse to occur. A battle cannot be won without one person's succumbing (by death or surrender) to another's will. Meaning cannot be generated without iterative instantiations of the political moment.<sup>40</sup> If this meaning, as the source of community substance, is an essential component of politics, it follows that a political regime cannot stand for long if Voegelin's representation or Arendt's politics fail to arise.

If the soldier is to be a nation-builder in accordance with the scholarship on nation-building and U.S. military doctrine, he must see to it that both the tangible and intangible aspects of the regime are "built." Yet, if Arendt is correct, this is an impossible task. One simply does not "build" symbols, stories,

narratives, and meaning. Of course, the soldier as nation-builder can most definitely perform actions that conduce to the development of the tangible (e.g., the provision of essential services, infrastructure, and bureaucracies). Moreover, the soldier as nation-builder might be capable of helping cultivate the conditions for Arendt's politics to occur (e.g., the provision of security, the establishment of public forums, the construction of legislatures, and the cultivation of civil society). Yet, in the decisive sense, a durable politics and polity will emerge only when the indigenous human persons exercise their capacity to *begin something new* in a positive, constructive way. Such an outcome depends not ultimately on security or essential services, but on what General David Petraeus identified in his April 2008 testimony before Congress as an "attitudinal shift" among the indigenous population.<sup>41</sup>

Voegelin's and Arendt's theorizing should be of interest to American strategists. The United States' politico-strategic vision understands that instability in a country or region poses security risks to the United States. Hence, the United States—which has chosen to divide the world into geographic combatant commands—seeks to seize the initiative:

The drivers of conflict emerge as numerous symptoms of crises worldwide. In this era of persistent conflict, rapidly evolving terrorist structures, transnational crime, and ethnic violence continue to complicate international relations. These conditions create belts of state fragility and instability that present a grave threat to national security. While journeying in this uncertain future, leaders will increasingly call on stability operations to reduce the drivers of conflict and instability and build local institutional capacity to forge sustainable peace, security, and economic growth.<sup>42</sup>

The military, taking its cue from presidential administrations, observes that "the recent experience of operations in the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan, coupled with today's operational environments, clearly indicates that the future will be an era of persistent conflict—one that will engage Army forces around the world to accomplish the Nation's objectives."<sup>43</sup>

It is apparent that the human realities of unpredictability and spontaneity are the qualities that prompt American strategic thinkers to worry.<sup>44</sup> Yet it is these very qualities that, Arendt asserts, (a) characterize the very nature of human relations and (b) are requisite for an authentic politics to arise. The solutions for stabilizing failed and failing states (if such solutions are to appear at all) will be less the result of a

supposed nation-builder's predictable, means-end fabrication. Such solutions—which can be no more than provisional—will be more the result of an unpredictably fortunate confluence of persons, events, and beginnings. Any results that come to pass will be more the result of serendipity than craftsmanlike design. The political moments that troopers in Iraq and Afghanistan await—with hope—are not the stuff of regularity, patterns, trends, or statistical significance. On the contrary, it is the statistical outliers that move the world—for good or ill.<sup>45</sup> Given this view of political reality, U.S. strategists and military professionals ought to ask: how far, and in what direction, will our nation-building literature, doctrine, and strategy take us?

If the foregoing narrative is plausible, American strategists must take to heart that neither indigenous persons nor expeditionary nation-builders can *build* a durable polity simply by building electrical power plants, schools, government offices, and banks. At most, policymakers may deploy soldiers—as part of a larger “whole of government” effort—in order to *facilitate* those extraordinary moments of political instantiation by providing security, limited governmental mentorship, targeted economic development, comprehensive security-force training, and assistance in the provision of basic human necessities. The American soldier must, given such a role, take to heart the fact that his principal missions relate not only to will imposition via violence, but also to a cooperative and creative via Speech and Action. Put otherwise, soldiers—much to their surprise and, possibly, unbeknownst to the American polity—have become in their day-to-day dealings with Iraqis and Afghans participants in indigenous Action and Speech. Their participation, which occurs over countless cups of Chai-fueled discourse, persuasion, cajoling, and arguments, puts the soldiers in the middle of those moments of political potentiality from which—it is to be hoped—a civilized, human-rights respecting polity might emerge. The soldier, in such an environment, can no longer engage in will imposition alone. The soldier must come to view his mission as partly (albeit significantly) one of a facilitator of political space and a restrained cooperator in political moments. He must serve as a facilitator and cooperator, all the while struggling to remain hopeful that the extraordinary and unpredictable will occur in a salubrious way.

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<sup>1</sup> See Celestino Perez, Jr., "The Embedded Morality in FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*," *Military Review*, May/June 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey C. Isaac, "The New U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual as Political Science and Political Praxis," Vol. 6, No. 2 *Perspectives on Politics*, June 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume Three: Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 357.

<sup>4</sup> *Field Manual 3-0: Operations*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, February 2008, Foreword.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Defense Instruction, Number 3000.05, September 16, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* This instruction renewed guidance contained in Department of Defense Directive, Number 3000.05, November 28, 2005. The 2005 document introduced the policy that stability operations "shall be given priority to combat operations and be explicitly addressed and integrated across all DoD activities including doctrine, organizations, training, education, exercises, materiel, leadership, personnel, facilities, and planning."

<sup>7</sup> Voegelin, *op cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, 20 January 2009.

<sup>9</sup> *Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, December 2006, paragraph 3-37.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraphs 3-49 and 3-50.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 3-38.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 3-51.

<sup>13</sup> Compare, for example, Obama's Address with George W. Bush's First Inaugural Address.

<sup>14</sup> These are secondary virtues because one may exercise them in the conduct of noble or barbaric endeavors. See Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 31: Hitler and the Germans*, trans. and eds. Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 103-104.

<sup>15</sup> Harvey C. Mansfield, "How to Understand Politics," *First Things*, August/September 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 27.



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<sup>17</sup> Rogers M. Smith, "The politics of identities and the tasks of political science," *Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics*, eds. Ian Shapiro, Rogers M. Smith, and Tarek E. Masoud (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 51.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?" Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49. Voegelin's distinction between elemental and existential representation is not idiosyncratic. A thinker with a wholly different view of the world, William Connolly, appears to touch upon the same distinction, although the implications are different. See Connolly's distinction between positional sovereignty, which is akin to Voegelin's elemental representation, and cultural sovereignty (or the ethos of sovereignty), which is akin to Voegelin's existential representation, in "Post-Sovereign Pluralist Politics," in *William E. Connolly: Democracy, Pluralism, and Political Theory*, eds Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Do note that both the complex of symbols constituting the ruling idea and our rulers are both dependant variables that change over time. Transitions occur at regular intervals within the three branches, and our complex of symbols change as well. For instance, the symbol of "equality" is not the same today as it was during, say, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which in turn differs from the meaning of "equality" contained in the Declaration of Independence.

<sup>22</sup> Voegelin, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *FM 3-0*, paragraphs 2-20 and 2-21 as well as Figure 2-2.

<sup>24</sup> James Dobbins et al., *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building*, RAND, 2007. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>25</sup> William B. Caldwell, "Foreward," *FM 3-07: Stability Operations*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, October 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [2d edition]), Chapter XIV.

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<sup>27</sup> Patricia Owens, *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Books, 2003 [3d edition]), 173.

<sup>29</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [2d edition]), 177.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-184.

<sup>35</sup> Hannah Arendt, "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern," *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, 302.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* Arendt explains that meaning "can never be the aim of action and yet, inevitably, will rise out of human deeds after the action itself has come to an end." See also Arendt, *Human Condition*, 154-155.

<sup>37</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184.

<sup>38</sup> Arendt, "The Concept of History," 307.

<sup>39</sup> Consider, e.g., Clausewitz's concept of Absolute War.

<sup>40</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199: "This space does not always exist, and although all men are capable of deed and word, most of them—like the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian of antiquity, like the laborer or craftsman prior to the modern age, the jobholder or businessman in our world—do not live in it. No man, moreover, can live in it all the time. To be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance."

<sup>41</sup> David Petraeus, "Gen. Petraeus's Opening Remarks on Iraq: Address to the Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing," *CQ Transcripts*, *Washington Post* online, 8 April 2008.

<sup>42</sup> *FM 3-07*, Foreward paragraph 1-10.

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<sup>43</sup> *Field Manual 7-0, Training for Full Spectrum Operations*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, December 2008, 1-1.

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 230: “The point is that Plato and, to a lesser degree, Aristotle...were the first to propose handling political matters and ruling political bodies in the mode of fabrication. This seeming contradiction clearly indicates the depth of the authentic perplexities inherent in the human capacity for action and the strength of the temptation to eliminate its risks and dangers by introducing into the web of human relationships the much more reliable and solid categories inherent in activities with which we confront nature and build the world of the human artifice.”

<sup>45</sup> See Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp. 42-43: “[I]t is a hopeless enterprise to search for meaning in politics or significance in history when everything that is not everyday behavior or automatic trends has been ruled out as immaterial.”